

COMMENT

GET AN EYEFUL OF DOWNTOWN'S SOUPED-UP LAS VEGAS HOSTEL



The Las Vegas Hostel has been remodeled, but the character remains in details like this mosaic.

Photo: Erin Ryan

Erin Ryan

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Brindisi isn't exactly on the hit list of Italian cities, but a friend and I had such a kickass time at a hostel in the sleepy port that we missed Venice completely. Every night was a party there, with Aussie boys and Brazilian grandmas drinking them under the table (and dancing on it). It had nonstop espresso, a laundry room where I could wash my horrifying socks after weeks of backpacking, cozy bunks and hilarious innkeepers that I still tell stories about 15 years later.

Even the sketchy hostels (London) and the ones that occasionally lose electricity (Athens) can be sweet memories, because they're not just generic bedrooms attached to a Coke machine. They are creatures of place, as memorable to me as the monuments, ancient relics and incredible restaurants.

I confess I've never stayed at the [Las Vegas Hostel](#). Yes, because I live here, but also because I didn't hear about it until new owner Downtown Project reintroduced it to the city last week. The remodel started early this year, and general manager Julian Ross says it has progressed "slowly, room by room." We're talking everything from fresh paint and carpet to funky art and new common areas. "The goal for us is to get everybody to hang out with one another down here on the first floor, rather than being tucked away in their room like in a traditional hotel," Ross says.

We tour the lobby, with its checkerboard tile, pops of red and slate-gray check-in desk under mod bulbs hanging from black wires. It's simple and inviting. Through the front window I see a cruiser bike, one of three the hostel loans to guests for neighborhood rides. Ross says it's a 10-minute walk to the heart of Fremont Street.



Photo: Edison Graff



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The entry feeds into a galley kitchen stacked with tools, whether you want a cute little coffee percolator, an enormous industrial can opener or a toaster from another time (and possibly planet). From 6-10 a.m. guests have unlimited access to pancake fixings and oatmeal, with coffee and tea available 24/7. The adjoining dining room could be a café, with stainless-steel fridges, bright red chairs and a dark faux-wood floor made for tons of foot traffic. Ross says the hostel plans to add beds to some of the dorms to maximize capacity—and opportunities for meeting people from everywhere. “Probably 90 percent of our guests are international. ... I thought coming over here that it would be a really young demo, but no—18, 20s, 30s, 40s, 60s, 70s, all the way up. A lot of people are attracted by the hostel lifestyle.”

We climb to the second of three floors on an outdoor terrace, where I can see that all the doors are painted as flags from countries around the world. There are 38 private and shared rooms and 154 beds, so you have the option of your own king-size all the way to a bunk in a room with seven other travelers. I check out a basic dorm; nothing fancy, but clean and bright with built-in lockers, an in-suite bathroom and plenty of free air conditioning (yup, some hostels make you pay). Ross says that like a hotel, the hostel adjusts its pricing to demand, so a private room might run you \$55-\$75 while a dorm bed starts around \$25. “On weekends, and weekdays for that matter, the [private] rooms ... will go for as much as rooms at the Downtown Grand or the El Cortez, or more. But people choose to stay here because they get this experience.”



Photo: Edison Graff

Hostels feel like extensions of their cities, rather than sterilized escapes. And there is close-knit interaction in common areas. The one straight off the Las Vegas Hostel's kitchen is a game room with a pool table, cards and classics like Monopoly, the counter seating welcoming spectators and laptop users alike. It has a kiosk of brochures for tours and attractions, and a wacky book collection with titles ranging from *An Introduction to Linear Programming and Game Theory* to *The Year Without Pants*.

Ross says the back room was cluttered with storage, but now it has comfy couches and an unused bar with so much potential (the 1322 Fremont St. Lounge sign came with it). To the beat of local radio pouring from a speaker, I wander from artwork to artwork, the painting of an astronaut elk pulled from DTP's warehouse fitting perfectly with the hostel's old ceramic mosaic of the Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas sign. Then I hit the star of the remodel—an entirely new room built for stadium-style entertainment, with repurposed theater seats and a screen that will soon connect to Apple TV or Roku.

And then there's the pool that has been here all along. It's so rare for a hostel, and DTP's upgrades have turned the deck into a vibrant social center. It's always open (quiet hours are 10 p.m.-6 a.m.) and has a barbecue so guests can grill. On the corridor wall across from it is a big map of the world, with pins stuck in places guests call home. It's a vestige of the old days of the Las Vegas Hostel, as are the



Photo: Edison Graff



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“We don’t want to eliminate the character,” Ross says.

Matt Mastanduno says there were so many pins in the old map that it came down in pieces. He has worked at the front desk since January 2013, before DTP stepped in.

“I loved it from the first day I started here, and now with all the renovations and the changes coming and our affiliation with Downtown Project, it’s really heading in the right direction,” he says of the new life in this building, which he guesses is about 30 years old. “When they started doing all of the painting I could really see, wow, this place has a lot of potential. ... With the revitalization of the Downtown area, I think it’s gonna be a good addition, especially once they start moving the borders of Fremont further Downtown.”

Mastanduno has lived on-property for a year, so he spends a lot of time with the guests, whether grilling steaks by the pool or taking them on Fremont East crawls, giving them “an insider’s view” of Vegas. He has more ideas to enrich their stay, including an outdoor movie setup of bed sheets and a projector, but for now, he’s happy with the refreshed vibe. “It’s so night and day from what it used to be. ... It just feels more welcoming.”

Aesthetics and amenities matter (unless you’re desperate in the middle of the night in London). But hostels stick in my brain because of the people. I doubt the Las Vegas Hostel struggles much to fill rooms, but now it’s primed to bring visitors out of them, and maybe to entice others from Downtown’s hotel corridor to the outskirts.



Photo: Erin Ryan

“With a hotel, you’re either in your room or you’re out. With a hostel, it’s geared toward meeting people, being in the common areas, getting together,” Mastanduno says. “For some, this is their once-in-a-lifetime trip, so they want to meet people they’ll know forever.”

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